

VZCZCXRO3869

OO RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDF RUEHIK RUEHKUK RUEHLZ RUEHROV RUEHSR  
DE RUEHLB #0147/01 0361448  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
O 051448Z FEB 09  
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4155  
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 3436  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 3641  
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL//CCPA PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000147

STATE FOR NEA/ELA - LAWSON, NEA/ELA - IRWIN, NEA/PPD, R,  
INR/R/MR, INR-PARENT,  
NSC - MCDERMOTT

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [KMDR](#) [OPRC](#) [KPAO](#) [KISL](#) [KPAL](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: Lebanon: Murr TV (MTV) To Resume Broadcasting

¶1. (U) Summary: MTV announced it will resume broadcast on March 31, 2009, seven years after its coerced closure. Michel El Murr, the CEO, denied that the Lebanese Forces "or any other foreign or domestic party" was behind the reopening. March 14 contacts, however, have been pushing for the reopening as a way to level the playing field in terms of media coverage for the June parliamentary elections. El Murr indicated that the positive atmosphere created by the Doha Agreement encouraged the decision. End Summary.

MTV Announces It Will Resume Broadcasting

¶2. (U) At a press conference on January 28, CEO Michael El Murr told a gathering of former MTV employees, politicians and media representatives that MTV will resume broadcasting on March 31, 2009. Michel El Murr is the nephew of the powerful Greek Orthodox politician of the same name, whom the Ambassador met on February 4 (septel). Originally, according to El Murr, the station was to have resumed broadcasting in 2006 but the July war with Israel interrupted their plans; he indicated that the positive atmosphere created by the Doha Agreement encouraged the reopening of the station. El Murr denied categorically receiving financial support, saying their "own capabilities," allowed the re-opening. (Note: We have heard that the Saudis, on Saad Hariri's request, are providing the financing. End Note.) Murr added: "MTV will be along the same lines (it used to pursue). It will be independent, objective and neutral...but will have an opinion." El Murr announced that the new slogan will be "The Voice of the Silent Majority." The previous slogan was "A Free Voice in the Service of Freedom."

Funding Sources

¶3. (U) The decision to re-launch raised several questions about who will finance the station and what policy it will have. El Murr confirmed "there is no external funding from any embassy, country, people or political party at all... We have the same capital structure, the same investors and board members (as before)." El Murr also denied reports that an agreement was reached with advertising tycoon Antoine Choueiri who is known to be a staunch supporter of the Lebanese Forces Party. He said "it (MTV) will not be the voice of the Lebanese Forces." (Note: March contacts have been pushing for MTV to reopen to balance Aoun's OTV and LBC, both perceived as being biased toward the opposition, to level the playing field for the June 7 parliamentary elections. End Note.)

¶4. (U) A MTV senior source told Embassy Public Diplomacy staff there are two main reasons for re-launching the station. The first reason is that, during this election period, many politicians are willing to pay money and, therefore, this is the best time to raise funds. The other reason is that Arab advertising tycoon Antoine Choueiri pulled out from LBCI (the major TV station in Lebanon) and

is willing to cover MTV. They can now guarantee at least ten million dollars in advertising revenues but they are still negotiating the deal. MTV was involved in intensive negotiations with Choueiri and the Lebanese Forces Party to finance the station, but the negotiations collapsed because the Lebanese Forces wanted to control "editorial and news decisions." The source told PD that MTV is currently negotiating a business, "purely commercial," agreement with Choueiri and is seeking 14 million dollars in annual advertisements.

¶5. (U) The source told PD that there are several March 14 politicians who promised to help the station. Some figures are MP Michael Pharaon, MP Farid Mekari, former parliamentary candidate and billionaire Sarkis Sarkis, and anti-Hizballah politician Ahmad Al-Assaad, who also reportedly is receiving funding from the Saudis. The source also confirmed that the Lebanese Forces, similar to the other March 14 members, promised to provide them with certain funds. He estimated the figure between five to six million dollars.

#### Station Policy

¶6. (U) El Murr said "we will try to be as before, independent and professional allowing everyone the opportunity to appear on the screen..." He said "MTV will not take sides with anyone... We do not want to categorize it as being in the middle, as a media outlet, we do not have a political color. Media outlets do not necessarily have to have a political color or do propaganda." In response to a question, he said "we are working to prevent the return of the Syrians or the Israelis." In a press interview, El Murr said "we

BEIRUT 00000147 002 OF 002

are here to play the role of a media that is not a propaganda tool for anyone or any party or current." El Murr added "there is no doubt that we will affect Christian public opinion, but also Lebanese public opinion in general... Lebanese here and abroad, to say you have a role you must fulfill, as we did in the past, to ask them to rise to their role again and not give up or lose hope, to know that this country is theirs and that we can all live together, build a nation of institutions and go back to the Lebanon we knew before, and this is what we saw in the past few months, after Doha."

¶7. (U) The MTV source informed us that MTV is against March 8 winning the elections. They believe that a victory for March 8 will mean "making the country Shiite", common code in Lebanon for those who oppose Hizballah or Iranian interference. They will support March 14 as much as they can but will try to be as moderate as possible. The plan is to work according to MTV owners' convictions in each district.

¶8. (U) El Murr also discussed the family disputes that led to the channel's closure in 2002. He confirmed that the El Murr family has moved beyond their past differences (Note: His father, Gabriel El Murr, contested the parliamentary elections against the daughter of his brother MP Michel El Murr in Metn back in 2002. The relations were tense between members of the family until the assassination attempt on the life of the Defense Minister, Elias El Murr, in 2005 which helped reunite them. End Note.) The MTV source informed us that the family will most probably support the elder MP Michel El Murr in the elections in Metn (against the Free Patriotic Movement).

#### Structure and Programming

¶9. (U) MTV is planning to broadcast on the terrestrial and the satellite channels, eighteen hours a day, starting at 7:00 a.m. local time. They will be airing twelve hours of live shows, many of them political and social. The ground floor of a new building is equipped. There will be established commentators on current affairs. In September, the beginning of the second programming phase, entertainment shows will be broadcasted.

¶10. (U) MTV is expected to re-employ many of the people who used to work for them. Some of the people whose names were mentioned by the

media were journalists who worked with Al Hurra or are still working with Al Hurra. Hizballah Al Manar TV's correspondent asked whether MTV was trying to "fill the failed role" of Al-Hurra by recruiting much of its personnel. El Murr responded "Not at all... Through our professional practice of journalism people will see that this is not true at all." He added: "None of the people working in the editorial (news) department will be hidden, and the ones who will appear on the screen will be seen to everyone." He added: "we believe that most of the people whom we lost at one time or another will return to MTV."

#### Conclusion

¶11. (U) MTV was the second major Christian TV station in the country before its closure on September 4, 2002 by a court order for violating article 68 of the Lebanese election law. The law forbade the use of a broadcast medium to advertise on behalf of candidates in elections. There is no doubt that MTV's return will increase competition over the already slim advertising budget that TV stations have to share. The number of Christian owned stations will be three, which raises questions about whether or not the divide among the already divided Christian community will increase or whether MTV will succeed in attracting Christians, as it did back in 2002 when it spearheaded the campaign against the Syrian regime and its proxies.

Sison